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ABSTRACT

Why focus on art instead of on some other discipline to approach intercultural understanding? This paper argues that because art is about the spirit, the self, the soul, the things that people think are important, it should be the key choice. To lay the foundation for this argument, the paper addresses art as communication of core values and ideas. Art is aesthetically framed communication from one human being to another about things that count which implies that most often the aesthetic component in art serves as an extrinsic function beyond the decorative. It finds that one way to understand people is through their art. The goal of multicultural education in Florida is to prepare students to live, learn, communicate, and work to achieve common goals in a culturally diverse world by fostering understanding, appreciation, and respect for people of other ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, language, and cultural backgrounds. The paper identifies six instructional premises for multicultural arts education in Florida and outlines five instructional strategies for such education. It concludes that understanding a culture's ways through making and examining art works cross culturally may be a plank in the bridge of multicultural and intercultural art education and, in turn, may become a bridge of peace between peoples everywhere. (Contains 23 references.) (BT)

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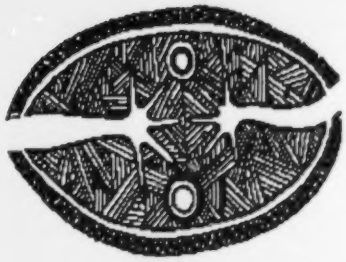

InSEA

"A Rationale for Multicultural Art Education Focused on the Florida Model"

by

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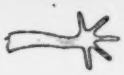
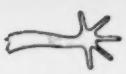

A Rationale for Multicultural Art Education Focused on the Florida Model

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Why focus on art instead of some other discipline to approach intercultural understanding? I'll argue here that it's because art is about our spirit selves, our souls, the things we think are important, the things that move us. And if we understand such things about someone from somewhere else, it's much harder to see them as odd and alien. It's much harder to dismiss them as someone foreign, someone who doesn't count as much as we do. When we understand their life of the spirit, we begin to understand why they do what they do and we have to take them seriously. And even beyond that, when we begin to understand others' ways of doing things it helps us through the added dimension of another perspective to understand more about ourselves. To lay the foundation of this argument I'll first address art as communication of core values and ideas.

Art is aesthetically framed communication from one human being to another about things that count (R. Anderson, 1990; Dissanayake, 1988; Lippard, 1990). This definition implies that most often the aesthetic component in art--the wonder that brings it alive, that separates it from social studies or other content–serves an extrinsic function beyond the merely decorative. That function, which is usually both prosaic and symbolic, is to serve as a marker that in some way defines the people who make, use, and view artworks or aesthetically framed objects (R. Anderson, 1990).

Art is something people do to give them a sense of themselves, both as process and as product. Thus art works themselves and the process of making art works both serve as vehicles for understanding human nature in particular social contexts. The ways art is made, received, used and valued reflect the values, mores, institutions and ways of doing things held in common by any group of people. This can be shown simply by comparing the art and artifacts of different cultures. Why is Hokusai so much more like Hiroshige than David, who made his images at basically the same time? It is because culture makes the artist who makes the art. Or as Lacan (Sarup, 1993) put it, it is language that speaks the person rather than the person who speaks the language. Of course, it's filtered a little differently through every individual which is why Hiroshige is not a carbon copy of Hokusai, and David is not a carbon copy of Delacroix. But the larger Japaneseness or Frenchness is easy to recognize in each case. The point is that culture is constructed and agreed upon; it is not a biological or a natural given (R. Anderson, 1990; Schweder, 199?), and art is a form of cultural communication, both as artifact and process.

The means of art and the feelings of life that it animates are inseparable (Geertz, 1983). The formal concerns–the composition, lines, colors and so on--rather than being form for its own sake--reflect life concerns of the artist and his or her society. In fact, it is the relationship of the thematic content and the means of its expression (style and technique) together that make up the expressive quality of the art work. If the viewer perceives a unity between what the work of art seems to be attempting and what is achieved in that viewer's mind and heart, then the result might be called aesthetic. But what is aesthetic for someone of Baroque European culture may or may not be aesthetic for someone from Tokyo. The universal impulse to make and live in beauty takes locally specific, culturally determined forms.

Simply put, then, art is culturally embedded artifacts and performance, that objectify a group's concepts of reality (McFee & Degge, 1980) making them more tangible, more perceptible, more discernible. It makes subjective, psychic and social constructs more concrete, more understandable, more real (Dissanayake, 1988, 1992; Langer, 1980). Art gives shape to the life of the spirit, the life of the mind, the collective visions of people everywhere, and in that way promotes common understandings and social cohesion necessary for every group of people's survival (Dissanayake, 1992). It follows then that one way to understand people is through their art.

The next question is, of course why should we care? Why should we seek to understand ourselves and others through the windows and mirrors we call art? What's the benefit?

The current dominant paradigm in North American education divides learning into discipline-specific subject areas, such as art, mathematics, language arts and so on, but some educators (Anderson, 1992, 1985c; Eisner,) have argued that learning subject matter content may really be secondary at school to learning society's processes and values. I would go as far as to argue, in fact, that subject disciplines such as art and mathematics are only valued to the extent that they support the primary socialization function of schooling. And typically, in this system, art is perpheralized. The art teacher can expect to be the last one hired, the first one cut, and have the program with the smallest relative budget. Art is generally not valued very highly at school.

This is ironic, because education, in general, has many of the same social functions as art, namely and primarily the identification and transmission of behaviors, values, and ideas held in common by the group. Formal education, in particular, is consciously structured specifically for this purpose (Illich, 1999; Trend, 1995). As with making and receiving art, through education, children are expected to learn about the values, mores, and ways of doing things that their society holds to be most significant. The socialization function of both education and art, then, is primary. At school, content areas are given a central or peripheral place in the curriculum based on how much they contribute something valuable to this socialization process. It should be obvious already, potentially, how art education fits this socialization agenda, as an instrument for helping students understand themselves and society, and how to live successfully in it.

If engaging in making and understanding art is potentially such a powerful tool in showing us society's ways and our own way in society, why has it been peripheral in general education for so long? Why isn't it at the center of the curriculum? Maybe it's because many art educators don't recognize that art is not simply aesthetic form. Maybe it's because they teach art as technique and form, as the elements and principles of design applied to clay and watercolor, rather than as significant human communication about things that count. Art must be seen in art education as being more than art for its own sake. Rather than form for its own sake, art is an aesthetically-framed, cognitively oriented, symbol making activity. It represents us and our life spirit. Thus it is intrinsically social in nature. At school we need to teach and learn about art not for its own sake but as a vehicle for understanding and appreciating the people who make and use it.

By extension, if art is to be used as a vehicle to understand people the next question is, "What people?" The answer, in a multicultural context, is potentially all people, including ourselves. More than 200 years ago, the founders of the United States began their Declaration of Independence from England with the words, "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal." Today we recognize that the men they were referring to were property-holding white men, that women and people of color, and the poor, and the otherwise disenfranchised were not included in this statement. And when we realize that this, statement set in the context of the late eighteenth century was simply a reflection of its time and place, we further recognize that in fact very few truths are self evident, that in fact most social truths are socially constructed, not given. They are constructed by groups of people in particular social contexts. And only when enough people accept them–when critical mass is achieved–do they become truths. Knowledge, beliefs, mores, and ways of doing and understanding things and the social institutions that propagate them are social constructions.

Art is one of these social constructions and if it's widely held and/or if it stands the test of time, in the social sense it can be said to be reflecting some commonly held truth. A primary way societies construct and transmit their cultures from one generation to the next includes ways of making, perceiving, interpreting and valuing the arts. Because they are constructed and agreed upon, not given, the arts, like other cultural institutions, must be learned from generation to generation. This is or should be one of the primary purposes of art education.

In this context, from a multi/intercultural perspective, the point to made here is that one can and should learn not only oneself and one's own cultural heritage through art, but also that of others. To address the art of others in an authentic manner means that art teachers must recognize and must help their students understand that although the impulse to art may be universal, its forms, meanings, and value are different from culture to culture (T. Anderson, 1988). Thus teaching and learning in the arts should include not only the making of aesthetic forms but also aesthetic or philosophical inquiry, historical and/or contextual examination, and criticism and/or contemplation focused on the art object or performance in a manner that will shed light on its meanings and value within the context that it is made and used. Teaching and learning of the arts in a multi/intercultural context gives students the ability to perceive the arts "in ways intended by their creators, making them not mere curiosities, but sophisticated manifestations of metaphysical, cultural and emotional meaning (T. Anderson, 1988, p.8).

Why is useful or valuable to understand others outside of our own immediate spheres? Most obviously, as witnessed by the fact that we are here form all over the world, the world is shrinking. We must understand each other if we are to deal with each other successfully. In this context the goals of multicultural education as articulated by Banks (1999) are understanding (and hopefully respect) for others, as well as the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function in one's own and across cultures. In addition, Banks (1999), argues that individuals who know the world only from their own cultural or ethnic perspective are limiting not only their knowledge of others, but of themselves. We can get a much fuller understanding of ourselves as well as others when we view our own backgrounds and behaviors through the eyes of those who have different cultural assumptions. Another important goal of multicultural education is to reduce the conflict that comes from the pain of being misunderstood. Like the Guernica Children's Peace Mural Project I've been involved with the last several years, multicultural education is thus at least a plank in the bridge of peace. Ultimately multicultural education is about understanding each other for the larger civic good, toward the end of creating and maintaining a more equitable and just society.

If a primary goal of education is human understanding, then art education in this context can be positioned at the center of the general curriculum. Examining art works from near and far, from now and before, and producing works of art that arise from multicultural understandings can serve as the core not just of art education, but also of general education. For such an agenda to be successful requires that art at school is not limited to the traditional Western art forms–the visual arts, music, dance, and theater arts--but also to art forms and aesthetic artifacts indigenous to other parts of the world such as story telling, body adornment, ritual performance and the making of functional containers, furniture, and dwellings and so on. If the point of multi/intercultural art education is that art should be used as the vehicle for understanding people, not the end of art for its own sake, then the art of all peoples must potentially be addressed.

Based on these premises Dr. Jack Taylor, in the School of Music at Florida State University and I received a grant to develop multicultural guidelines, frameworks and strategies for arts education for the State of Florida. I will focus on visual art in the rest of this paper but the arts, in the context of this project, refer to all the arts.

Rationale for Multicultural Education in Florida

According to Weatherford (1991), "The process of change through cultural contact and the mixture of various populations will probably continue as long as human beings live on earth, but it will probably never again attain the dramatic proportions that it did in North America in the last few centuries" (p.5). The current student population in the State of Florida is 61.4% European-American, 24.24% African-American 12.86% Hispanic-American, 1.58% Asian/Pacific Island-American, and .18% Native American (Multicultural Education in Florida, 1991). This puts Florida among the most culturally diverse states in one of the most culturally diverse nations on earth. It is projected that by the year 2010, Florida's minorities will collectively be the majority (Multicultural Education in Florida, 1991). Further, our survey showed that, beyond the broad distinctions noted above, many Floridians are voluntarily claiming more specific identities such as Greek, Puerto Rican, and Haitian. Although the survey format did not encourage such a response, eighteen specific ethnic designations were offered by respondents as demographic information. This supports a recommendation by the State of Florida Multicultural Education Task Force, that more specific demographic data are desirable "in terms of more specific cultures (Colombian vs. Hispanics, Haitians vs. blacks...") (Multicultural Education in Florida, 1991, p. XI). All of which is to say that people in Florida are 1) increasingly conscious of, and willing to claim, their cultural heritage, and that 2) the cultural make-up of Florida is changing.

With the change in demographics comes a changing attitude toward what is taught in Florida's schools. Rather than the traditional emphasis on Western canons, almost to the exclusion of other cultural information, there is a ground swell of support for equitable attention to the plurality of Florida's cultures in Florida's schools. Simply put, education is not value-neutral. It is a normative activity (Eisner, 1994) that will either consciously or unconsciously propagate a value position. In pluralistic Florida, people expect their beliefs, values and mores to be represented in the schools that serve them.

What is the primary merit of this equitable representation? Through multicultural arts education students will focus on the arts of their own and other cultures comparatively. The goal of understanding and appreciating the arts of many cultures should lead students to understand that no cultural, ethnic, social, religious, or national group is inherently superior or inferior to another (T. Anderson, 1988). Different art forms represent different ways of thinking and feeling, and different values, which may very well be on par with one's own in their level of sophistication and cultural sensitivity, in spite of the fact they are different. Multicultural arts education can be a very effective tool in undermining stereotypes, prejudice and ridicule--the mechanisms of cultural superiority. Multicultural arts education, ideally, can give students a level playing field (Multicultural Education in Florida, P. X), helping both minority and majority students understand and value multiple cultures. For minority students this can give the positive self concept and skills necessary to take them out of the "at risk" category. Students of the dominant culture are given a broader conceptual base through understanding the arts and lives of people in cultures other than their own.

This has international as well as state and local ramifications. The world is shrinking and becoming more interdependent as transportation and communications advance (source). Students who have greater insights cross-culturally through multicultural arts education will be the players rather than the pawns in this global schema. Commissioner of Education Betty Caster (Multicultural Education in Florida, 1991) echoed this view when she stated that multicultural education is essential in understanding one another, reducing world and community tensions, and preparing ourselves to compete economically in this shrinking world.

Goals for Multicultural Education in Florida

The goal of multicultural education in Florida is to prepare "students to live, learn, communicate, and work to achieve common goals in a culturally-diverse world by fostering understanding, appreciation, and respect for

people of other ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, language, and cultural backgrounds" (Multicultural Education in Florida, p. 5). There are two primary components to this equation. The first is recognition and respect for differences between people. The other is understanding what all people have in common and using our various skills and perspectives to work for the common good.

Because the arts objectify feelings (Langer, 1980) belief systems (Arnheim, 1989) and states of being in ways not accessible to any other form of communication, their examination will give insights into cultures' life spirits and ways of doing things. Producing, examining, and evaluating the arts comparatively, from a range of cultures, gives students access to ways of perceiving and thinking which are beyond their own limited cultural perspectives. Students broadened awareness and increased depth of sensibility, achieved through encountering the arts multiculturally, will contribute to the goal of multicultural education, stated above. Not only will students see how we are all different, but they will see and understand that there is a pan-human spirit represented in the arts.

Instructional Premises for Multicultural Arts Education in Florida

Multicultural arts instruction should:

1. focus on the aesthetically-framed work, performance, and/or artifact as the primary vehicle for multicultural understanding. This should include examination of its sensual/formal qualities (including formal components), use, and value in the culture of its origin.
2. present artworks authentically, in their own contexts, using indigenous conceptual constructs, language, materials, and methods of production whenever possible.
3. study the arts, not in isolation but in relation to how they draw upon and reflect the larger culture's values, mores, beliefs, ways of doing things, and institutions.
4. be theme-based. Theming is an effective way to collect, organize and present information, encouraging understanding and sensitivity to people across a broad ethic/cultural spectrum, setting work in a meaningful context, avoiding the perception of other cultures' arts as mere curiosities.
5. foster the understanding that there are many different equally valid and valuable forms of artistic expression.
6. help students understand not only human variation cross-culturally, but also commonalties through expressive behaviors in the arts.

Instructional Strategies for Multicultural Arts Education in Florida

1. Perhaps the foundational or primary requirement of multicultural arts education is that it be approached contextually, that is art forms should be studied (contemplated, examined, analyzed, produced, and evaluated within the corollary examination and understanding of the belief systems, culture, geophysical context and other relevant contextual factors which spawned it.
2. The art form in question should be the central focus of study. Understanding the beliefs, values, mores, ways of doing things, and institutions it represents should follow from this focus, rather than vice versa. The content of study is the arts in their authentic contexts. This focus on the arts in context is because it is believed they have some unique contribution to offer as markers of the human spirit.
3. Instruction, ideally, should be theme-based. This is possibly the most effective way to collect, organize, and present arts education. It presents a logical and unified conceptual grid or framework on which to hang performances/production, concepts, historical information, criticism and contemplation. It provides the necessary unity for contextualization, helps instruction avoid the decontextualization that often leaves the study of art forms from cultures other than one's own as curiosities having little human meaning or value.
4. Teaching and learning in multicultural arts education should avoid overlaying one culture's values on the art forms or ideas about art of another culture which will result in lack of understanding. Such cultural overlays are counterproductive for appreciative response and goal of equally valuing multiple cultures art.
5. Modes of teaching and learning should be appropriate to the art form being studied within its context and belief system. Content-based arts education, seeing the art form as central, approaches it through various instructional strategies: production and/or performance, contextual and/or historical examination, aesthetic and/or philosophical l inquiry, and critical examination and contemplation. In addition the multicultural premise demands that indigenous Non-Western, non-analytic, traditionally oral/narrative, display- oriented, and functionally-related approaches be used, as appropriate.

View Toolbars

The end goal of Florida's multicultural, content-based arts education is understanding and appreciating art as a vehicle of human expression in a general educational context. This fosters at least the potential for intercultural respect and fosters the possibility to center art not only in school but in society.

Conclusion

Chilean author Isabel Allende cites our incredible adaptivity as a species as the quality that has allowed us to live successfully at the North Pole, the Sahara Desert, the heights of the Himalayas, and the sweltering Amazon Basin. But that same adaptivity has produced the diversity that breeds intolerance, fear, and war between us. She cites religious and ethnic difference as the principle cause of the much of the world's hostilities, arguing that human aggression is easily turned against those who are not like us. This is readily witnessed most recently in Bosnia and East Timor where neighbor has turned on neighbor. As Allende says, It seems that it is "much easier to see small differences than great similarities." (1999, p. 9). Yet carried to its logical extreme uniformity would destroy us. I would argue that like all species is our diversity that ultimately makes us successful. Animal that specialize too highly ultimately become extinct.

I'd like to close with a story to illustrate the critical importance of diversity in unity and unity in diversity in our increasingly interdependent world. I've become an avid student of Japanese customs and mores partially as a result of my three trips to Japan, two of which were related to the Children's Peace Mural Project. One thing I've discovered is that at the heart of it we really don't understand each other very well. According to Tames (1993):

> "The Japanese see themselves largely as Westerners see them--polite, loyal, hard-working, conformist and not profoundly inventive, as well as clean, kind, and with a refined aesthetic sense. They also see themselves as warm, impulsive and sentimental and Westerners as cold, calculating and unfathomable." (p1)

Wait a minute! Did I get that second part right? What I hear from North Americans is just the opposite. How many times have I heard a North American describe the Japanese as coldly inscrutable, untrustworthy people who'll tell you anything and not keep their word? North Americans are frequently very upset to find that a Japanese might tell them what you want to hear. Why don't they just come out and say "no"?, a North American may ask?

Well, from a Japanese perspective it simply has to do with good form. In all the time I've spent in Japan, I never heard the word "no." It just isn't done, because it's improper form. But that doesn't mean your request hasn't been denied. And by the way, from the Japanese perspective, how could you trust someone who doesn't even understand that much about good form? Good form in this case is the "wah" principle, the principle of keeping harmony in human relations. And this is just one of many differences between our two cultures. There frequently seems to be a somewhat uneasy balance between admiration of each other's skills and accomplishments and distrust of each other's ways of doing business.

On my last night of my second trip to Japan, the core mural team was riding the train back from Tokushima to Osaka. We were discussing what we all believed to be core differences between the Japanese and Americans that cause this uneasiness between us.
"We Japanese believe in loyalty," said one of my colleagues.
"So do we Americans," I said, "And we also believe in honesty and integrity in keeping our commitments."
"So do we in Japan," said another colleague, and so on, until we all just stopped talking and looked at each other. We couldn't find any deep, fundamental value on which we disagreed.
Finally one of our team said, "Well maybe we're not as different as we thought."
The sense of "Otherness" was gone. Having worked together for weeks for the common good, across cultures, and in spite of many false starts and misunderstandings, we really were, in fact, a team. As an accepted member of the team, separated from other Americans, from being able to retreat to a hotel room at night, from my own cultural buffers, I believe I got an insider's view that I suspect few outsiders ever get.

It would be easy here to draw platitudes, across cultures, such as the one that goes, "we are all alike under the skin". But a close examination reveals we aren't. Because we have human culture and that varies, so do we. However, we are all people. And we do have, it appears, some universal impulses, like loyalty to the group and honesty and integrity, and the drive to make art. But these impulses take different forms in different circumstances and in different cultures, and that's the rub. We take on the ability to engage in (Sarup, 1993; Wilson, 1988) and understand (R. Anderson, 1990) symbolic communication by being embedded in a particular culture. Beyond substance, it is the manner in which something is presented that allows us access to the inner life of the other. Or keeps us out. It's the form that counts after all! But in context. In this sense, understanding each other's forms of expression is crucial for the deeper understanding that can bridge the gap toward the result peace through mutual respect.

It is vitally important to understand that the extreme stereotypes of belief that pit one cultural group against another, tribe against tribe, are no longer a survival mechanism, but a detriment to the survival of us all. Art has been instrumental in focusing group attention through aesthetic means on those values, mores, and ways of doing things critical to a group's survival (Dissanayake, 1992). Understanding a culture's ways through making and examining artworks cross-culturally, then, may indeed be a plank in the bridge of multicultural and intercultural art education, which in turn may become a bridge of peace between peoples everywhere.

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